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Polyptoton in *In Memoriam*:
Evolution, Speculation, Elegy

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Section 95 of Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* features two prominent examples of verbal repetition. The first and more immediately striking of these involves the word-for-word repetition of two and a half lines of verse. The speaker recalls a summer evening sitting with others outside his family home:

While now we sang old songs that pealed
From knoll to knoll, where, couched at ease,
The white kine glimmered, and the trees
Laid their dark arms about the field.¹

There then follows what has often been recognized as the climactic moment of the entire elegy. Left alone by his companions, the speaker begins to reread old letters from his late friend, Arthur Hallam, and enters a trance-like state of spiritual transport, during which he experiences at last a sense of direct communion with Hallam’s soul. When he finally emerges from the trance, the speaker looks around him and perceives the same landscape as before, described in precisely the same words.

Till now the doubtful dusk revealed
The knolls once more where, couched at ease,
The white kine glimmered, and the trees
Laid their dark arms about the field. (95.49-52)

Striking though this repetition may be, however, it also feels in some ways quite familiar. The episode as a whole exhibits the recognizable features of what M.H. Abrams calls the “greater Romantic lyric,” a type of poem that became standard in nineteenth-century English verse. Section 95 closely follows the typical three-part structure that Abrams outlines: the speaker starts off alone in a landscape; he then experiences an encounter that temporarily absorbs all his attention; finally, he returns to an observation of the landscape, but with a significantly altered perspective.² Nor do we need to go even so far afield as the Romantic lyric to find a parallel for the structure of return-with-a-difference that we find in this episode, since that is the structure of the *In Memoriam* stanza itself: the rhyme scheme moves from A to B then back to A, but with the difference that rhyme always entails.³ One could even say that the two stanzas quoted above “rhyme” with each other, since rhyme retains the ending of a word while changing the beginning (*pealed, revealed*). The episode thus reproduces the structure of its own constituent quatrains, as the paired stanzas form a rhyming bracket for the experience in the middle.

The second major instance of repetition in section 95 is less conspicuous but more significant for the poem as a whole. It comes between the two stanzas above, when the speaker describes the effect of reading his friend’s letters:

And strangely on the silence broke
 The silent-speaking words, and strange
 Was love’s dumb cry defying change
 To test his worth; and strangely spoke... (95.25-8)

This stanza offers a startling example of the classical rhetorical figure *polyptoton*, which involves the repetition of a single root word, either in different grammatical cases or as

different parts of speech. Here the figure appears twice in the first two lines: “silence” reappears as “silent”; “strangely” becomes “strange.” In the fourth line, “strange” then turns back to “strangely,” while “speaking” becomes “spoke.” The speaker may claim to be “defying change” in these lines, but he also embraces change, at least at the level of verbal inflection.

Polyptoton is, in a sense, the exact opposite of rhyme: it keeps the beginning of the word intact and changes only the ending (*silence, silent*). The trope is relatively common in poetry, and even in prose. But Tennyson uses it with extraordinary frequency in *In Memoriam*: more than half of the poem’s sections contain at least one instance of polyptoton. And he uses it to extraordinary effect. The lines in which the figure appears are among the most moving in the poem. For example:

But since it pleased a vanished eye,
 I go to plant it on his tomb,
 That if it can it there may bloom,
Or dying, there at least may die. (8.21-4)

And dead calm in that noble breast
Which heaves but with the heaving deep. (11.19-20)

And, where warm hands have prest and closed,
Silence, till I be silent too. (13.7-8)

Or skipping ahead to the end of the poem:

That out of distance might ensue

Desire of nearness doubly sweet;

And unto meeting when we meet,

Delight a hundredfold accrue. (117.5-8)

Sad Hesper o'er the buried sun

And ready, thou, to die with him,

Thou watchest all things **ever dim**

And dimmer, and a glory done. (121.1-4)

These, together with dozens of other examples, suggest that polyptoton is essential to the effect of *In Memoriam*. In this essay I show how the trope serves multiple purposes in Tennyson's elegy, helping to forward some of the poem's central philosophical claims while also encapsulating its most effective consolatory strategies.

Polyptoton is described by a number of classical authors, who (perhaps appropriately) use a variety of different names for it – a variety that only multiplies in the Renaissance. Most of these authors consider polyptoton to be merely an ornament. The widely read Latin rhetorical treatise *Ad Herennium*, formerly attributed to Cicero, claims that polyptoton and similar forms of wordplay are truly suited only to epideictic speeches, intended show off the orator's skill, rather than to real speeches being made in a court of law.⁴ The English rhetorician George Puttenham, writing in 1589, agrees that the figure is essentially a form of wordplay: "Then have ye a figure which the Latins call *traductio*, and I the Tranlacer: which is when ye turn and tranlace a word into many sundry shapes, as the tailor doth his garment, and after that sort do play with him in your ditty."⁵

Renaissance poets accordingly tended to use the trope in a lighthearted spirit. Ullrich

Langer, for instance, argues that in the works of Pierre de Ronsard polyptoton serves above all as a figure of pleasure.⁶ Similarly, Philip Sidney displays a sense of playful exuberance when he offers six different forms of the same word in the first two lines of a sonnet from *Astrophil and Stella* (1591): “**S**weet kiss, thy **s**weets I fain would **s**weetly endite, / Which even of **s**weetness **s**weetest **s**weetener art.”⁷

Yet polyptoton is more than just a game. According to Puttenham’s contemporary Henry Peacham, “The use [of this figure] is twofold, to delight the eare by the derived sound and to move the mind with a consideration of the nigh affinitie and concord of the matter.”⁸ And critics have noted that Shakespeare, for instance, made serious use of the trope in his sonnets.⁹ Tennyson is thus in good company in turning what might seem to be mere wordplay to significant poetic purpose. As Isobel Armstrong points out, moreover, *In Memoriam* constantly presents itself as being no more than an “anguished epistemological game,” in which the poet merely “sports with words” and “grief ... with symbols play[s].”¹⁰ This defensive disclaimer, she argues, helps the poet overcome his guilty consciousness of the inadequacy of language and liberates him to speak of the unspeakable: “The gratuitousness of play grants the poem its freedom to be art, and certainly to be artful.... Yet a profounder necessity is at work in the need to play. Play *is* a necessity. The poem has to sport with words in order to enable itself to continue.”¹¹ Tennyson’s wordplay is inseparable from his greater elegiac endeavor.

Nor is Tennyson the first elegist to make use of polyptoton. Among the classical elegies that influenced *In Memoriam*, none was dearer to him than Catullus’ lament for his dead brother (poem 101), the final words of which Tennyson quotes directly in

section 57.¹² Catullus' poem begins with a polyptoton reminiscent of those in *In Memoriam*: "**Multas** per gentes et **multa** per aequora vectus."¹³ (In 1880 Tennyson quoted this opening line from memory in a letter to William Ewart Gladstone: "I am glad too that you are touched by my little prefatory poem, so far as to honour it by a comparison with those lovely lines 'Multas per terras [*sic*] et multa per aequora vectus,' of which, as you truly say, neither I nor any other 'can surpass the beauty.'")¹⁴ In addition to Catullus, Tennyson also drew directly, in various parts of *In Memoriam*, on classical pastoral elegy, a tradition in which polyptoton figures prominently. In the first idyll of Theocritus – the work that set the precedent for all subsequent pastoral elegy – the first line of the actual lament, following an introductory dialogue, features polyptoton; so does the opening line of Bion's similarly influential "Lament for Adonis."¹⁵

But perhaps the most important classical precedent for Tennyson's use of the trope comes in the fifth Eclogue of Virgil. In Virgil's poem the shepherd Mopsus sings a lament for the dead Daphnis that not only begins with a polyptoton, in keeping with earlier Greek models, but ends with another: Daphnis is described in conclusion as "**formosi** pecoris custos, **formosior** ipse" (keeper of a beautiful flock, more beautiful himself).¹⁶ In contrast to the Greeks, however, Virgil provides a second half to his elegy. After Mopsus completes his lament, his fellow shepherd Menalcas replies with a song in which Daphnis is resurrected and transformed into a heavenly being. Menalcas introduces his response with yet another polyptoton: "**Daphnin** ad astra feremus; amavit nos quoque **Daphnis**" (We shall bear Daphnis to heaven; Daphnis loved us too) – in which the deceased appears, significantly, first as object, then as subject (5.52). In devoting half his poem to the apotheosis of the dead Daphnis, describing at length the

new life experienced by him in heaven, Virgil is greatly expanding on the hints of rebirth that are present in the earlier elegies. Eclogue 5 is thus the classical pastoral elegy that comes closest in spirit to *In Memoriam*, which depends fundamentally on the belief that death represents, not an end, but a change, and which offers many conjectures about the nature of Hallam's new existence. And here we find the chief significance of polyptoton in *In Memoriam*. When Tennyson offers a single word in multiple forms, it subtly but powerfully reinforces two crucial motifs in his poem: evolution and speculation.

The importance of contemporary theories of evolution to *In Memoriam* has long been recognized, as over the course of the poem Tennyson seeks to reconcile life and death through a notion of constant, gradual transformation. Polyptoton provides a linguistic correlative to this natural tendency toward change; it is no coincidence that "life" and "death" are two of the words in the poem most commonly subject to polyptotic variation. In what follows I begin by showing Tennyson's readiness, visible already in his earliest poetry, to draw implicit connections between biological and linguistic morphology, and I argue that the use of polyptoton in *In Memoriam* reflects his belief in the vital power of words not just to record the ongoing processes of life but directly to affect them. I then consider the poem's speculativeness – its characteristic willingness to entertain multiple hypotheses or points of view. *In Memoriam* keeps recurring to certain subjects, but in place of the changeless repetition that typifies traumatic grief, the poem tends to introduce new variations each time it repeats an idea or an image. Such imaginative flexibility, I argue, is indispensable to the successful work of mourning. Polyptoton, which embodies this principle at a verbal level, can thus be seen as a key trope, not only of Tennyson's poem, but of the genre of elegy.¹⁷

Polyps and Polyptoton: The Language of Evolution

Throughout his career Tennyson remained well informed about recent scientific developments. He owned and read Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), which forwarded a theory that the earth's form had changed gradually over eons through forces that still continued to operate. He likewise read, soon after its publication, Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which applied similar evolutionary theories to biology, including human biology. Critics have analyzed at length the influence of these works on the structure as well as the imagery of *In Memoriam*.¹⁸ But Tennyson also kept himself well versed in the most advanced linguistic thought of his day. His "lifelong interest in philology" began when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, where he found himself among a group of active proponents of the new philological theories that had begun to spread from Germany to England; two of his close friends from that time, J.M. Kemble and R.C. Trench, went on to become leading Victorian scholars of language.¹⁹

These two areas of interest, the scientific and the linguistic, were more closely associated than modern readers may be likely to assume. In the first place, they shared a methodology: as Patrick Scott explains, "Victorian language study, or philology, was much less kin to modern theoretical linguistics than to the contemporary geologist or biologist."²⁰ Moreover the theory of organic form espoused by Romantic literary critics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge drew explicit connections between biological and linguistic structures.²¹ Coleridge himself was one of the leaders in England of the new philology, which proposed a more dynamic model of language than had been offered by John Locke

and his successors; it placed less emphasis on etymology and more on language as a process through which meaning evolves. “For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS,” as Coleridge wrote in 1825.²² Armstrong sums up this new theory of “language as living form” thus:

[W]ords are unfixed, not the equivalents of things or even things in themselves, but agents free to constitute the world in and through themselves, free to combine and transform its categories in and through their own, free to change. ... They are autonomous, the agents of change and transformation.²³

As Donald Hair, among others, has shown, Tennyson quickly absorbed the import of these linguistic debates, incorporating the new theories of language into his poetry as fully as he did the breakthroughs of physical science.²⁴

“The Kraken,” for instance, a poem from Tennyson’s undergraduate volume *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), already demonstrates the same conjunction of these two fields of thought as is found in *In Memoriam*. It conveys a theory of biological form not only through its explicit imagery but through the forms of individual words, relying on the implicit analogy between anatomical and verbal morphology. The innovative element of “The Kraken” lies not in its use of polyptoton (although it does feature a few examples) but in its tendency to register the same meaning in its verbal parts and particles as it does in the whole.

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee

About his shadowy sides: above him swell
 Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;
 And far away into the sickly light,
 From many a wondrous grot and sickly cell
 Unnumbered and enormous polypi
 Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.
 There hath he lain for ages and will lie
 Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,
 Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
 Then once by man and angels to be seen,
 In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.²⁵

The “key word,” as Richard Maxwell points out in his illuminating article on the science behind the poem, is “polypi” at the end of line 10; but the term, as Maxwell aptly puts it, is “slippery.”²⁶ For most of the history of its use, “polyp” or “polypus” had referred to large, multilimbed sea creatures, such as the squid or octopus, or the (legendary) Kraken. But starting in the mid-eighteenth century, the word began to be applied to tiny mollusks that showed a similar form – multiple tentacles attached to a central stem – on a microscopic scale. These new polypi exhibited two extraordinary features, which though unconnected appear similar. The first, and by far the more important, was their capacity to propagate through division. If even the smallest portion of a polyp is cut off, not only is the missing segment regenerated by the original creature, but the excised piece will grow into a whole new creature. Every part of the polyp thus seems to be instinct with the life principle of the whole. The other feature of polypi that drew attention was their

clustering together into what appears to the eye to be a single large organism, until closer inspection reveals it to be composed of individuals. This second characteristic led Sir Humphry Davy in 1828, two years before the publication of Tennyson's poem, to explain away the legend of the Kraken by "proposing that masses of ... tiny polypi must have been mistaken for a single gigantic creature."²⁷

The polyp, with the surprising vitality of its parts and the striking correspondence between the parts and the whole, was a scientific marvel, and its discovery significantly influenced the development of biological thought in Europe.²⁸ It also appealed to the imagination of Romantic proponents of the notion of organic form, who perceived in the polyp an analogy to literature. Thus Friedrich Schlegel, in "On the Homeric Poetry" (1796), writes:

For the epic poem is, if I may express myself in such a manner, a poetical polyp [*ein poetischer Polyp*] where every small or large member (which can be separated without mutilation or disintegration from the matured whole into simple, and no longer poetic or epic, components) has a life of its own, and indeed even as much harmony as the whole.²⁹

What Schlegel describes in the epic Tennyson performs in his lyric: even the smallest "member" repays attention, since it seems independently to reproduce the broader sense of the poem. "The Kraken" imagines an utterly passive creature, devoid of will or consciousness, yet at the same time still "battening" and steadily expanding. This state is suggested not only by the imagery of the poem but by its sounds, notably the end rhymes, which likewise perpetuate themselves with a minimum of apparent effort. The first rhyming pair, "deep" and "sleep," is repeated exactly (in reverse order) near the end of

the poem. And their central vowel sound, the long *e*, appears in eight of the lyric's fifteen rhyme words, reinforcing the sense of a mindless reduplication marked by minimal variation.³⁰

But the analogy between the Kraken and the words that describe him is not limited to the end rhymes; Tennyson is more ambitious and more original in his exploitation of verbal resources. His Kraken seems mysterious in part because it is described almost entirely in terms of what it is not or does not do. Negative formations abound, whether in individual words (“dreamless, uninvaded”) or in larger units of phrasing. The description of the light that apparently allows us to perceive the Kraken – “faintest sunlights flee / About his shadowy sides” – in fact describes the near-total absence of illumination: the “sunlights” are faint, and flee away, and leave the Kraken in shadow. In this context, it is tempting to see within the word “sunlights” the implied word “unlight” – the negation of light. “Unlight,” of course, is not an English word. But neither is “sunlights”: Tennyson appears to have been the first English poet ever to use the plural form of the word.³¹ It seems plausible, then, to perceive a new, unusual form growing within the longer word – a negative formation, in keeping with the general tenor of the description.

On inspection, moreover, the poem reveals a surprising recurrence of the negative particle “un.” The sound appears not only in its expected place at the beginning of words such as “uninvaded” and “unnumbered,” where it explicitly fulfills its regular semantic function, but hidden in the middles of words: “thunders,” “sponges,” “sunlights,” “wondrous,” “once.” A germ of meaning, reflective of the poem as a whole, seems to lurk in the inner parts of these words. “Thunders,” in the opening line, is particularly

notable in this regard, since it appears in a welter of words describing depth (“Below,” “deep,” “far beneath,” “abysmal”) – which helps us detect within it, not just “un,” but the buried word “under” as well. Maxwell points out that, in Tennyson’s description, the Kraken “possesses certain foetal qualities: he is hidden away in a dark watery place, leads a restful, unconscious existence, and absorbs food while asleep.”³² The presence of words and parts of words within other words reproduces the effect of this embryonic imagery. Tennyson actively draws attention to the middle of his words through assonance: the chime of “unnumbered” and “slumbering,” for example, highlights within the former the hidden presence of the word “numb,” thus underlining at the level of the individual syllable the sense of “unconscious existence” that characterizes the poem as a whole.

Tennyson’s willingness to register significant ideas in the shapes of individual words, visible in miniature in “The Kraken,” appears on a larger scale in *In Memoriam*. Many sections of *In Memoriam* are devoted to considering the changes undergone by our selves and our world – whether to lament their inevitable decline or to express faith in their gradual improvement – and these are the sections in which transformation at the level of the word or phrase is most common. Section 123, for example, borrows imagery directly from Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* to describe how the surface of the earth constantly evolves:

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.

O earth, what changes hast thou seen!

There where the long street roars, hath been

The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow

From form to form. (123.1-6)³³

Appropriately, the language of this section recalls but transforms that of an earlier one: the “long street [that] roars” seems to be the same as the “long unlovely street” with its intrusive “noise” that the speaker memorably visited at the beginning of the poem (7.2-10). The echo, stretching across nearly the whole length of the elegy, lends credibility to the sense of continuity across great lapses of time and change that the section conjures up.³⁴

More commonly, however, verbal transformation in sections concerned with evolution takes the more compact form of polyptoton. The trope appears in many passages concerning extinction or decline; in these cases the sense of fading is often captured in the diminuendo of the polyptoton itself. Thus in a line from early in the elegy, already quoted above, the speaker pictures that his poetry, “**dying**, there at least may **die**” (8.12). A later instance suggests the speaker’s sense of his own regression, as he declares himself “An infant **crying** in the night: / And with no language but a **cry**” (54.19-20). A similar effect appears yet again in descriptions of the fading of the old year: “The year is **dying** in the night; / Ring out, wild bells, and let him **die**. / ... The year is **going**, let him **go**” (106.3-7). But such images of decline are outnumbered in the poem by passages about progress, in which polyptoton is if anything even more frequent. In section 41 the speaker praises his friend’s gift of perpetual self-improvement – “Thy spirit ere our fatal loss / Did ever rise from **high** to **higher**” – only to go on to lament:

But thou art turned to something strange,

And I have lost the links that bound

Thy **changes**; here upon the ground,

No more partaker of thy **change**. (41.1-8)

Here the small differences between “high” and “higher,” and especially between the “change” that Tennyson knew on earth and the unknown “changes” that have come since, are precisely the source of the pathos. Yet as the poem progresses, the same transformation to ever higher states becomes increasingly a cause for celebration.

Hallam is said to reach “A **higher height**, a **deeper deep**” (63.12); he is compared to someone “moving up from **high** to **higher**” (64.13). Emulating his friend’s constant evolution, the speaker himself seems “To scale the heaven’s **highest height**” (108.7).

(Suggestively, Tennyson concludes his late poem “By an Evolutionist” [1889] by returning to the same formulation, this time in triplicate: “As he stands on the **heights** of his life with a glimpse of a **height** that is **higher**” [“By an Evolutionist,” line 20].)

The faith in progress toward a greater end is asserted more and more frequently as *In Memoriam* continues. It finds its culminating representation in the poem’s Epilogue: set on the wedding day of Tennyson’s sister, the Epilogue includes the poem’s most explicit images of evolution, both biological and cosmological, and features no fewer than nine examples of polyptoton. The speaker says of the bride, “For thee she **grew**, for thee she **grows**”; the priest pronounces “the most **living** words of **life**”; the speaker exclaims, “O **happy** hour, and **happier** hours / Await,” and then, seeing “on the downs a **rising** fire,” intones, “And **rise**, O moon, from yonder down.”³⁵ These last lines are followed by the famous passage in which Tennyson describes the child who will be conceived on this wedding night: drawing on recent evolutionary thinking, including that

of Chambers, he imagines a baby who, “moved through life of lower phase” in the womb, will emerge as a higher and more advanced form of human being (Epi. 125).³⁶ The poem then concludes on a joyous note, describing “the crowning race” that is to come, as well as the still greater transformation “To which the whole creation moves” (Epi. 128, 144). Tennyson’s use of polyptoton, the morphological changes that he introduces in individual words not only in the Epilogue but throughout his poem, help prepare the reader for this culminating vision of evolutionary progress.

“An Idle Case”: The Language of Speculation

Important as the Epilogue may be, its affirmation represents only one aspect of *In Memoriam*; by the same token, the significance of polyptoton in the poem is not limited to its association with the idea of evolutionary change. Many instances of the trope, after all, do not suggest change in a specific direction – from high to higher – but merely change: *silence* to *silent*; *strangely*, *strange*, *strangely*. Not evolution, in other words, but oscillation.³⁷ Yet change simply for its own sake, as a display of adaptability and flexibility, may also be significant. Peter Sacks notes that one of the fundamental conventions of elegy is to divide the lament among multiple speakers, fragmenting and multiplying the mourner’s voice; hence “even in elegies that call themselves ‘monodies,’ such as [Milton’s] ‘Lycidas,’ the voice of the elegist seems to work through several moments of extreme divisiveness or multiplicity.”³⁸ This fragmentation permits what Sacks calls the “necessarily dialectical movement of the work of mourning,” the dynamic process by which the bereaved moves from the static condition of “melancholia” toward consolation.³⁹ “An obvious instance,” he writes, of “this kind of division and progression

is Virgil's 'Eclogue V,' in which the consoling voice of Menalcas soars beyond the disconsolate plaint of Mopsus."⁴⁰ Sacks does not mention the instances of polyptoton in Virgil's elegy that were noted above (*formosi, formosior; Daphnin, Daphnis*), but they can be seen as participating in the necessary work of transformation, of "division and progression," that he outlines. Elegiac polyptoton thus represents, not only the change to which we are all naturally subject, for better or for worse, but something more active: the kinetic energy, the vibrating non-rigidity that enables the mourner not to shatter, but to survive.

In Memoriam displays very obviously the fragmentation and multiplicity Sacks describes, and more specifically the habit of dividing a single theme among multiple voices, even if technically the speaker is the same. This happens, for instance, in those sections that consider the same topic at widely spaced intervals, as in the three Christmas Eve sections (30, 78, and 105), which Tennyson himself pointed out as marking the main divisions of the elegy.⁴¹ These three sections all begin in the same way (they share a nearly identical fourth line), as the speaker faces the prospect of celebrating Christmas without his friend, but develop differently according to the speaker's altered outlook with each new year. They thus offer a parallax view of the same object from different vantages, an effect that occurs as well in several other pairs of sections. In addition to the two views of the "long street" discussed above, there are two anniversaries of Hallam's death (sections 72 and 99) and two apostrophes to Sorrow (sections 3 and 59). Likewise, the speaker at the very start of the poem (section 2) addresses an ancient yew tree in a graveyard; the following spring he finds it still "darkening the dark graves of men," but with the slight change brought by the changing season: "Thy gloom is kindled at the tips,

/ And passes into gloom again” (39.9-12). The final image applies to the speaker as much as the tree – unchanged at the root, he nevertheless displays the outward variability that is the sign of all life. But it applies just as well to the polyptoton just above (“**darkening** the **dark** graves”), which is essentially a form of repetition, but with that “kindling at the tips” that, however fleeting, indicates vitality.

This tendency to explore alternate points of view appears not only in the pointedly paired sections, marked by identical or near-identical beginnings and variable endings, but throughout the poem. The whole of *In Memoriam* could be said to consist of a series of speculations or thought experiments; the sections often come clustered into sequences of two or three, each imagining a variation on a single situation. Early in the poem, the speaker pictures the ship that is bearing Hallam’s body back to England sailing peacefully; then he pictures it sinking; then he pictures it becalmed (sections 9-11). Later, he envisions rejoining his friend in heaven only to find him changed and estranged, then changed but not estranged, then completely unchanged (sections 41-3). Later still, he wishes Hallam to look on him from heaven and sympathize with his earthly state, then changes his mind and desires Hallam not to look on anything that will impinge upon his joy (sections 61-2); eventually, he imagines that departed spirits are able to observe earthly life and experience “Some painless sympathy with pain” (85.88). In each of these cases Tennyson is ringing changes on a single root idea, and this practice is reinforced by the variations that he plays on individual words. It is no surprise that these sections regularly feature polyptoton – such as “Some **painless** sympathy with **pain**.”

The value of such thought experiments becomes clear in section 35. This is one of several sections in the poem that begin with the word “if,” indicating from the outset

that they engage in imagining hypothetical situations; in these sections too polyptoton is common. Section 35 speculates about what happens to the soul after death, and in traditional elegiac fashion it introduces multiple speakers, each proposing a different possibility. The last of these is Love, whose speech ends with the familiar figure:

And Love would answer with a sigh,
 ‘The sound of that forgetful shore
 Will change my sweetness more and more,
 Half-**dead** to know that I shall **die**.’ (35.13-6)

At this point the speaker lamentingly breaks in: “O me, what profits it to put / An idle case?” (35.17-8). But the speaker does himself an injustice. The whole poem is composed of such conjectural “cases,” not idle but of power to try the limits of the imagination, testing the mourner’s readiness to reconsider and adapt. The multiple grammatical cases in which we find words like “die” (“polyptoton” literally means “many cases”) embody that adaptability on a microcosmic level.

Hence other “if” sections follow the same pattern. Section 80 begins, “If any vague desire should rise, / That holy **Death** ere Arthur **died**” (80.1-2). Section 92 (“If any vision should reveal”) concludes with the language of rising that reappears in the Epilogue: “And such refraction of events / As often **rises** ere they **rise**” (92.15-6). Most striking, perhaps, are sections 61 and 62, mentioned above as an example of a conjectural pair, offering contrasting views about the sympathy felt by the dead for the living. In the former (“If, in thy second state sublime”), the speaker says of himself, “I **loved** thee, Spirit, and **love**” (61.11), positing a sense of continuity across time and tenses. (This echoes an earlier “if” section, in which the speaker speculates that, “If Sleep and Death

be truly one,” then “**love** will last as pure and whole / As when he **loved** me here in Time” [43.1, 15-6].) The following section (“Though if an eye that’s downward cast”) responds by likening Hallam to “**one** that **once** declined” – that is, condescended to love someone beneath him (62.5); but it is a happy coincidence that “decline” carries with it as well a hint of the grammatical declension of inflectional endings.

Finally, it is worth noticing the sections of the poem that recount the speaker’s dreams. Like the widely spaced parallax sections, the paired or grouped sections, and the conjectural “if” sections, the dream passages explicitly present alternative realities – in this case, the reality of waking life and the counterfactual reality of the dream, which are set side by side. The experience of multiple possibilities is clearly reproduced in the syntax, which allows the present and the remembered past to pace hand in hand. Thus the speaker recounts how, in his dreams, “we **talk** as once we **talked** ... In **walking** as of old we **walked**” (71.9-12). In the most elaborate of the dream poems, he refers to Hallam as “him I **loved**, and **love** / For ever” – once again recording two forms of relationship, temporally distinct, but which in the dream world are permitted to coexist (103.14-5). Most moving of all is section 68, which begins as follows:

When in the down I sink my head,
 Sleep, Death’s twin-brother, times my breath;
 Sleep, **Death’s** twin-brother, knows not **Death**,
 Nor can I dream of thee as **dead**:

I **walk** as ere I **walked** forlorn. (68.1-5)

Line 5 shows the same coexistence of present and past as the previous examples. But in the lines just above, polyptoton appears “speculative” in a secondary sense: sleep appears as the mirror image of death, “Death’s twin-brother.” Clearly, however, this is a distorting mirror, a case not of identical but of fraternal twins. Death dominates lines 3 and 4, but the word appears each time in a slightly altered form: *Death’s – Death – dead*. The universal cry of denial audible in the final words of line 3 (“No, not death!”) finds its answer in the polyptoton, in the slight but saving fragmentation, reduplication, distortion that sleep permits.

The prominent use of polyptoton in *In Memoriam* is significant both for the way it reflects Tennyson’s deeply held beliefs and, more broadly, for its implications for elegy as a genre. As regards Tennyson in particular, his willingness to register his faith in the value of evolutionary change within the very form of his words has a dual effect: it reinforces our sense of that faith while also communicating a philosophical stance, an implied claim that language is not distinct from the natural world in which we live but fully participates in its processes. More generally, Tennyson’s use of polyptoton to embody his constant imaginative speculation offers insight into the workings of elegy, which derives its effectiveness from its ability, not to end grief, but to reimagine and transfigure it. By demonstrating at the most fundamental linguistic level the possibilities of perpetual variation, polyptoton is able to play an essential role in the adaptive work of mourning that elegy undertakes.

¹ *In Memoriam* 95.13-6. All quotations from Tennyson refer to *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

² See M.H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 201-29.

³ For a full discussion of this aspect of the rhyme scheme, see Sarah Gates, "Poetics, Metaphysics, Genre: The Stanza Form of *In Memoriam*," *Victorian Poetry* 37, 4 (Winter 1999): 507-19.

⁴ See *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* 4.22-3, where the figure is not given a name but treated as a subset of paronomasia; note also that it is discussed only in terms of its use in oratory. Quintilian by contrast (*Institutio Oratoria* 9.3) calls the trope by its Greek name and gives both prose and verse examples. For a full account of classical sources, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, tr. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 288-92.

⁵ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne E. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 288.

⁶ See Ullrich Langer, "De la métamorphose: le polyptote comme figure du plaisir (Pétrarque, Scève, Ronsard)," in *Esprit Génereux, Esprit Pantagruélique: Essays by His Students in Honor of François Rigolot*, ed. Reinier Leushuis and Zahi Zalloua (Geneva: Droz, 2008), pp. 39-55, especially pp. 47-55.

⁷ *Astrophil and Stella* 79.1-2; in *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 186.

⁸ Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, 2nd edn (London, 1593), p. 55. Peacham calls the figure “paregmon” and gives an example from the book of Isaiah: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise” [Isa. 29:14]. Similarly, the Prologue to *In Memoriam* concludes, “And in thy wisdom make me wise” (Prol. 44), a polyptoton that is echoed at 108.15-6, 109.24, and 113.1-2.

⁹ See Jackson G. Barry, “‘Had, Having, and in Quest to Have, Extreme’: Shakespeare’s Rhetoric of Time in Sonnet 129,” *Language and Style* 14, 1 (Winter 1981): 1-12. Note that Barry (p. 8) also cites part of the passage from Peacham above; I am indebted to Barry’s discussion of the trope’s duality. For another take on the importance of polyptoton, see Michael E. Auer, “‘Und eine Freiheit macht uns alle frei!’: Das Polyptoton in Schillers Freiheitsdenken,” *Monatshefte* 100, 2 (Summer 2008): 247-65, which argues that Friedrich Schiller uses the trope in his plays to suggest the multiple forms that freedom can assume.

¹⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 172, citing *In Memoriam* 48.9 and 85.95.

¹¹ Armstrong, *Language as Living Form*, p. 172.

¹² The same words to which Tennyson alludes in *In Memoriam* 57.15-6, “frater, ave atque vale” (Brother, hail and farewell), later served as the title of his 1883 poem in honor of Catullus. On the importance of Catullus’ poem to Tennyson, see Barbara R. Pavlock, “‘Frater Ave atque Vale’: Tennyson and Catullus,” *Victorian Poetry* 17, 4 (Winter 1979): 365-76.

¹³ “Having traveled among many people and over many seas” (Catullus 101.1; my translation); in *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris*, ed. G.P. Goold, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 172. Catullus’ line recalls the very similar polyptoton at the opening of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1.3-4).

¹⁴ Hallam, Lord Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 2.239; the slight misquotation is evidence that Tennyson was quoting from memory.

¹⁵ Theocritus 1.65: “**Thyrsis** hod’ hôx Aitnas, kai **Thyrsidos** hadea phônâ” (This is Thyrsis of Aetna, and sweet is Thyrsis’ voice); Bion 1.1: “*Aiasdô ton **Adônin**; apôleto kalos **Adônis***” (I weep for Adonis; beautiful Adonis is dead). Quotations refer to *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, ed. J.M. Edmonds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 14, 386; translations are mine.

¹⁶ Eclogue 5.44. The opening of Mopsus’ lament (5.20-1) reads “Exstinctum **Nymphae** crudeli funere Daphnin / flebant (vos coryli testes et flumina **Nymphis**)” (The nymphs wept for Daphnis, undone by a cruel death / (You hazels and streams bore witness to the nymphs)). All quotations from Virgil refer to *The Eclogues and Georgics*, ed. R.D. Williams (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979); translations are mine.

¹⁷ Rhyme works in much the same fashion, since it too involves repetition with a difference. But polyptoton, in addition to being more unexpected and hence more noticeable than rhyme, preserves the meaningful root of words rather than their adventitious endings; it thus provides a closer parallel to the poem’s structure of offering speculative variations on a central theme. Meanwhile, the use of exact verbal repetition, which occurs frequently in *In Memoriam*, helps set off by contrast the use of polyptoton – as in the case of section 95, cited in the opening paragraphs above. On Tennyson’s

repetitions, both in the elegy and throughout his poetry, see Martin Dodsworth, "Patterns of Morbidity: Repetition in Tennyson's Poetry," in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), pp. 7-34.

¹⁸ Anna Barton points out that Chambers's work is known particularly to have influenced the description of the developing embryo in the Epilogue to *In Memoriam* (described below), and she draws attention the connection between Chambers's theories and his own use of language; see Anna Barton, "By An Evolutionist: Poetic Language in Chambers and Tennyson," in *The Evolution of Literature: Legacies of Darwin in European Cultures*, ed. Nicholas Saul and Simon J. James (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 87-99. For a classic account of Tennyson's absorption of contemporary scientific theory into his elegy, see Eleanor Bustin Mattes, *In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul* (New York: Exposition Press, 1951); see also Susan Gliserman, "Early Victorian Science Writers and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: A Study in Cultural Exchange," *Victorian Studies* 18, 3 (March 1975): 277-308, and Howard W. Fulweiler, "Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and the Scientific Imagination," *Thought* 59, 3 (September 1984): 296-318.

¹⁹ Donald S. Hair, *Tennyson's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 6. For a full account of language debates at this time, including the role played by the Cambridge Apostles (the intellectual group to which Tennyson and his friends belonged), see Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 162-210, especially pp. 191-5.

²⁰ Patrick Greig Scott, "'Flowering in a Lonely Word': Tennyson and the Victorian Study of Language," *Victorian Poetry* 18, 4 (Winter 1980): 371-81, 372.

²¹ Coleridge introduces the notion of organic form in his series of lectures on Shakespeare of 1811-12, notably the ninth lecture, where he draws on the work of August Wilhelm Schlegel; see *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 320-31, especially pp. 324-6.

²² From the Preface to *Aids to Reflection*, in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, p. 572. For Coleridge's role in the rise of the new philology and his influence on the Cambridge Apostles, see Hair, *Tennyson's Language*, pp. 18-9.

²³ Armstrong, *Language as Living Form*, p. 4.

²⁴ See Hair, *Tennyson's Language*, especially the opening chapter on Tennyson's exposure to new linguistic theories (pp. 7-40). Scott detects a gradual development in Tennyson's treatment of language in his poetry: "It is, I would suggest, broadly true that in his earlier poems Tennyson uses the etymological root of a word forcefully and directly for his own meaning, while in his later poems such etymological 'meanings' seem rather to be possibilities, potential explications to be held in tension with the overlay of modern usage" (Scott, "'Flowering in a Lonely Word,'" pp. 375-6).

²⁵ Ricks's text of the poem, which I reprint, represents the final version of the poem from 1872, which differs in one or two details from the 1830 text.

²⁶ Richard Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," *Victorian Poetry* 47, 1 (Spring 2009): 7-23, 10.

²⁷ Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," p. 10.

²⁸ See, in addition to Maxwell, Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), especially pp. 13-9 where Gigante describes

Abraham Trembley's discovery of the polyp and its properties in 1744, as well as some of the repercussions, both scientific and literary, of his discovery.

²⁹ Quoted in Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 40; the translation is Armstrong's. (I am grateful to Arden Hegele for drawing my attention to this passage.) Compare Coleridge's claim, in chap. 14 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), that poetry "propos[es] to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*"; see *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, p. 493.

³⁰ The same effect is conveyed by the polyptoton in lines 3-4: "His ... sleep / The Kraken sleepeth." Although the clause is redundant to the point of tautology, the difference between "sleep" and "sleepeth" suggests the incremental growth that varies the Kraken's otherwise changeless passivity.

³¹ A database search turns up no earlier instances of "sunlights," although later in the nineteenth century poets did follow Tennyson's example. Tennyson himself uses the word again in "Oenone" (1832; revised 1842), line 178.

³² Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," p. 13.

³³ For the echo of Lyell see Mattes, *In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul*, p. 61.

³⁴ The echo is strengthened by the more explicit recollection of section 7 just before, in section 119, where the speaker "come[s] once more" to view Hallam's old house (119.3).

³⁵ *In Memoriam*, Epi. 35, 52, 65-6, 108-9. Note that the trope is used in the Epilogue to describe not just progress but also descent or extinction, as is appropriate to the complex treatment of evolution throughout the elegy. Thus the last lines quoted play not only on

the word “rise” but on “down” as well, which refers in this case to a feature of the landscape but also implicitly balances the sense of constant upward motion; likewise the speaker begins the Epilogue by speaking of having recorded “In **dying** songs a **dead** regret” (Epi. 14).

³⁶ On Chambers’s popularization and elaboration of the recently formulated notion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – that the developing fetus passes through more primitive stages of human life, as Tennyson’s line describes – see Barton, “By an Evolutionist,” pp. 90-2.

³⁷ As Ullrich Langer writes, polyptoton manages to be kinetic and static at once, since “the end of the movement is contained in its beginning.... Fundamentally, then, and paradoxically, polyptoton *cancels* motion even as it embodies grammatical change” (Langer, “De la Métamorphose,” p. 45; my translation).

³⁸ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 35.

³⁹ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 36. Sacks derives the notion of “the work of mourning” from Sigmund Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia”; the term “melancholia” in Freud indicates the pathological form of grieving that remains immovable and inconsolable.

⁴⁰ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 36.

⁴¹ See Tennyson, *Memoir* 1.305. On the broader structure of repetition-with-a-difference in the poem, see Matthew Rowlinson, “History, Materiality and Type in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*,” in *Darwin, Tennyson and Their Readers: Explorations in Victorian Literature and Science*, ed. Valerie Purton (London: Anthem, 2013), pp. 35-48.